

3.

Letting Go Or Holding On

Changing My Long Term Role



During each of these periods in your life, certain functions or needs, such as financial needs and social needs, had to be carried out or fulfilled. A list of these functions appears in the left column of the chart entitled Chart of Responsibilities.

CHART OF RESPONSIBILITIES

Single (Before Marriage)	Married	Single (After Divorce)
<p>Functions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Financial needsSocial needsSexual needsEmotional needsHousekeeping needs (chores)Friendship/companionship needs		

Individual Role:

Now that you are single you are responsible for all the above, not your former spouse. Likewise, it is your former spouse's responsibility to resolve his or her own needs. You are responsible for your financial future, for obtaining emotional support, for handling the daily housekeeping chores and for ensuring your own social life.

The person responsible is the one who makes the decisions and is accountable for the results. In some ways, it's similar to having an acquaintance. You don't give an acquaintance your advice on how he uses his time or what she does with her money. And you would not pry into their personal business. Your acquaintance is the one who is accountable for making his or her own decisions.

Parenting Role:

Of course, there is a difference between this example and your own situation because your former spouse is also the parent of your child(ren). And that does complicate the issue. If there were no children involved, you might not continue the relationship with your former spouse at all. Because there are children involved, you do need a continued relationship. However, the areas of shared responsibility are limited to those involving the children. In all the other areas listed in the chart, your relationship with your former spouse is like that with any other acquaintance. Each of you has completely separate responsibilities in those matters. It is only in the role of parents that some responsibilities are still shared.

Let's focus on the parenting role now. On the next page is the Child-Rearing Decisions Activity. Read the directions and complete the activity now.

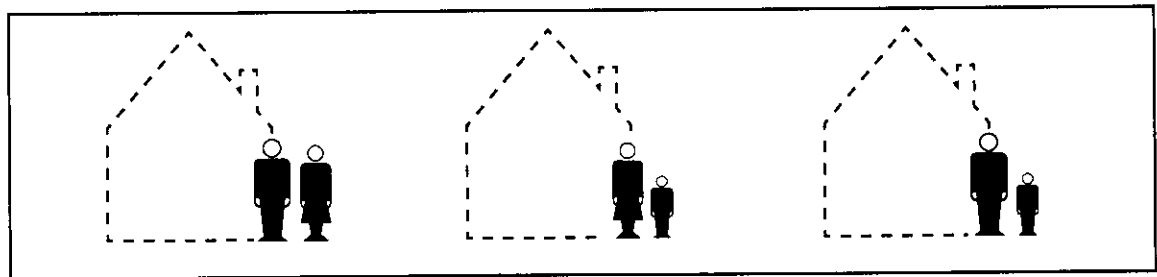


Therefore, it is extremely important that, after divorce, parents have an ongoing relationship with one another.

In the best interests of the child, parents must continue to parent together even though they choose no longer to live together. The relationship between the two parents must become realigned into a different structure. With a new alignment between the parents, a new term for parents after divorce is also needed. We use the term “co-parents” to designate parents following a divorce.

Family Role:

The third role that is important in our discussion is your role as a member of the family. Below is a diagram of a family both before and after the divorce. The diagram on the left is a drawing of a family with one child prior to the divorce. The diagram on the right is a drawing of the child’s family after the divorce. The main difference is that the child now has two houses.



Circle your current family. You probably circled yourself and your children (and drew in any new members of your family if you have remarried). Your child’s family consists of the same people as before but in two different locations. It’s important that both you and your child have a picture of the family after the divorce. Some people have a misconception that a non-custodial parent no longer has a family. Even if the location has changed, your role in the family is still vitally important. Your child has two homes.

In this section we’ve discussed three important roles you have in your current life: your personal role, your role as a parent, and your role as a member of a family. Although the responsibilities may have changed in each role, all three continue to be an important part of your life.

Letting Go

On paper, the redrawing of roles looks pretty simple. But it isn’t simple, is it? It’s much more complicated due to one element that isn’t reflected in the drawings: Emotions, the stuff that makes us human.

As a matter of fact, because of the emotional turmoil involved, many people have compared divorce to death or to many deaths. In the space below write down a few of the ways that divorce is similar to death.



Denial

When people stubbornly refuse to grieve, they are said to be in denial. Since grief is painful, most people try to put it off at least temporarily. You might hear people say, "I don't care anyway," or "She was never there for me anyway." However, if denial continues, it may be impossible for the person to move on to healthier stages of life.

Guilt

Feelings of guilt emerge when you examine what you might have done to cause the divorce or what you did do which may have hurt the other person. Your thoughts in this stage may have started with the phrase, "If only I . . ."

Anger

Anger is often present during the grief process. Following divorce it may take the form of blaming the former spouse not only for initiating the divorce but also for destroying your dream of the perfect family and home. It may even be turned toward yourself for your inability to prevent the divorce.

Bargaining/Depression

Grieving often brings feelings of isolation and loneliness; this is often the case in divorce. Almost as a last effort before resolving some of the grief is a last stand at bargaining with God, with oneself or with one's former partner. When that last big effort doesn't work, the person often experiences depression.

Memories (including you and former spouse)

Memories (Including you, your former spouse and child/ren)

You may be sad that you won't share these experiences again. However, no experience can be duplicated. You can still treasure the good moments and appreciate them for being a part of your life.

Remembering the positive times can assist you and your child with the grieving process. Many of those who refuse to remember the good times are often the same ones who will refuse to accept and heal from the divorce.

Although you may not be ready to fully accept the divorce or your new life, you may find that forgiveness can also be an additional healing tool for you in this process.

Forgiveness:

The concept of forgiveness can be very disturbing when someone has been seriously hurt. Yet the ability to forgive can help you let go of pain. When a parent will not let go of a belief that they were not loved, or that they cannot trust the other parent, they imprison themselves and their child to a future of pain.

Getting a divorce is painful enough on your child. Conflict and tension between you and your co-parent will negatively impact your child's self esteem. Therefore, to reduce conflict, reduce tension, and to let go of old pain, consider forgiveness. If you will not, your anger, your hurt and your pain will go on indefinitely. This doesn't sound like much fun! What do you have to lose? Pain?

Forgiveness Does Not Mean:

- That you condone the co-parent's behavior.
- Your pain is not real or not justified.
- You have to receive an apology or mutual recognition.
- A reconciliation.

It will, however, help your family work better.



Your Child Will:

- Agree with you and develop an impaired relationship with the other parent.
- Agree with you now but resent you and your message later.
- Disagree with you and defend the other parent.
- Minimize their own needs in order to be equally connected to both of you.

Any and all of these choices will damage your child's fragile sense of self. Both parents are essential to your child's healthy development.

Disengaging

The Necessity of Disengaging

Grieving is part of the process of letting go of the old role and adapting to the new one. What would happen if someone didn't let go of the old role? Let's take an extreme example: What would happen if a person's spouse died and the survivor put all his or her attention on the loss of the loved one? That person would be stuck, unable to cope with things around him or her.

It would be like being caught in quicksand. And if that person has children, the children would also be caught in turmoil.

"Letting go" of a divorced spouse is just as important as the letting go of a deceased spouse. Despite the pain of making the transition, it is necessary to let go of the old relationship if a person is to thrive. It is imperative for the children too.

Advantages of Disengaging

The word we use for letting go of the marital relationship after a divorce is "**disengaging**." You might think of it as detaching from the former spouse. Think of the words or phrases that come to mind when you think of being *attached* to a person and write them below. Then think of all the words and phrases that come to mind when you think of being *detached* and write them on the second group of lines below.

Describe what it means to be "ATTACHED" to someone:

Describe what it means to be "DETACHED" from someone:



There's an old familiar quote that says, "Bitterness binds you to each other as tightly as your love once did." The couple into revenge shows you an example of how bitterness ties the two people together in a never-ending knot.

Harmful to Children

Being *Engaged Through Revenge* clearly shows how staying engaged is harmful to the children. Decisions made by the parents don't take the children's needs into consideration. They take actions not because they are right for the children but because they are wrong for the other parent. The children get put in the middle and are used for the purpose of creating tension in the other parent (even though the children must then live with the result of that tension). Although staying engaged causes significant problems to the parent, it causes even greater problems for the children. After all, the children don't have a choice. They're also tied to the rope with no control of their own.



Let's look at another example of emotional engagement.

Engaged Through Hope

Steve and Cindy have been divorced a year. Cindy initiated the divorce. Steve still believes that Cindy is the only person who can make his dreams come true. Steve plans his weekend around places Cindy might frequent so that he might run into her. He makes a special effort to find something about their young child he has to tell Cindy about so that he can spend more time with her. He volunteers to babysit when Cindy works out of town on work assignments so that he can see her more often. He frequently tells her how miserable he is without her, hoping this will bring her back to him. He tells his small child that when Mommy and Daddy get back together she will have a family again.

This couple, too, is still engaged. Steve's life revolves around Cindy. He makes decisions based not on the needs of the child, but on the opportunity of staying engaged with his former spouse. This prevents him from establishing a new life for himself and it puts the child in jeopardy of emotional trauma. It turns the child into a pawn used for satisfying the parent's needs. It puts the child's needs last.

If you sympathize with Steve, you probably experienced similar emotions soon after the divorce. However, if you're locked into these behaviors a year or so later, it's very important for you and your child(ren) that you let go of this unhealthy bind.

Staying in Limbo

Breaking with the past role is important when developing a future role. If people stay attached to their former spouse either through anger and conflict or hope, it keeps them in a state of limbo. It's neither the role or relationship that came before the divorce and it isn't a role or relationship that can guide the person into the future.

People stay in limbo for many reasons. The first is fear. Staying engaged may mean there's lots of conflict, but at least it's familiar. Letting go and moving on to the future is scary. It's the unknown and one doesn't know what to expect.



If the amount of conflict between the parents is so high that every contact breeds increased tension, then a clean cut is in order. But remember, in the interests of the children, it must be temporary.

Letting Go Physically

Do you remember some of the examples for how people stay engaged physically? Now we'll concentrate on *letting go*, physically. That means no longer mowing the former spouse's lawn, making their dinner, or balancing their checkbook. It means allowing the former spouse to take responsibility for him/herself.

It may seem harsh or cold. Yet it is important to let go and allow your former spouse to let go of you.

Letting Go Emotionally

Disengaging emotionally is usually harder than disengaging physically. It means no longer expecting emotional support, social support or even friendship from one's former spouse. It means getting one's own emotional needs met elsewhere and not taking responsibility for his or her emotional needs. Disengaging means detaching from the former spouse. It means refusing to make decisions based on his opinions, no longer sharing intimate thoughts with her, and not allowing the person to push your emotional buttons. It means refraining from using the child to seek vengeance. It means cutting the cords that bind you to one another and letting go of the bitterness that keeps you entwined.

Rituals for Letting Go

Marriage begins with the marriage ceremony. It formalizes the relationship and gives it a starting point. One reason that divorce is so difficult is because there is no symbolic ceremony or ritual to mark the transition point. You might be surprised to find that creating your own ritual or ceremony can be helpful for letting go of the former relationship and for beginning a new relationship with one's former spouse. One such ceremony is The Candle Ritual.

The Candle Ritual

In this ceremony, you light a single candle symbolizing your new independent life. Then as you hold your single candle, you visualize this candle lighting your way to a future filled with bright happiness. You allow this candle to be your guide as you create your own future. You decide to keep this candle lit within you even after the candle itself is extinguished. Decide to extinguish the candle when you are ready to let go and blow out the candle.

The Rock Ritual

A second ritual involves a little more creativity. Go out and find a large stone or rock. It should be heavy enough to provide some weight but not so heavy that you can't carry it around with you. The rock symbolizes the burden you carry when you're still attached to your former spouse. Put it in your purse or pocket for several days. Be aware of it dragging you down as you carry it from place to place. Feel how cumbersome it is and how it interferes with your easy movement. Think how pleasant it would be to no longer have to carry it with you everywhere. Keep it with you a little longer.



Disengagement Contract

My Name is _____, and I married _____
(Your Name) *(Former Spouse's Name)*

on _____. Our children are _____.
(Date of Wedding) *(Child/ren's Name)*

Our marriage ended on _____. Therefore, _____
(Date of Divorce) *(Co-Parent's Name)*

is no longer my partner or my lover. We are both free to choose new partners. We are no longer connected by love and desire. We are only, and forever, connected through our child/ren. We may not always agree, but we choose to work together cooperatively. We will need to see each other with new eyes, eyes of caring parents only. We will work very hard to let go of the past and to start fresh to parent together. We owe this to our child/ren.

When we were married, we maintained two roles, that of parent and spouse. Now we will let go of the married role and focus only on a parenting role. This severing must be complete and clean. Remnants of the past are my responsibility to release.

I am responsible for me. I have custody of myself and I can choose to be bitter or choose to be better in the future. I am choosing to be strong for our child/ren. I choose to make mature decisions, not emotional decisions for the sake of our child/ren. I will control the impulse to say negative things about my co-parent when my child may be able to overhear me. I will learn to separate my feelings of the co-parent from my child's feelings. I will separate my needs from my child/ren's needs and I will allow them all the room they need to love _____.
(My Child's Other Parent)

I am committed to being a good parent even when it hurts.

Parent Signature _____ Date _____



Marriage Certificate

It is certified that on the _____ day of _____,

(date)

(month)

(year)

_____ and _____

(husband)

(wife)

were United in Marriage

